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Chairman Sturla and members of the Democratic Policy Committee, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to address you today on this important matter of school choice.

My name is Kathy Keafer and I currently serve as Administrator at Johnstown Christian School. I hold a doctoral degree in Educational Psychology from Regent University and also serve as an adjunct professor in special education with Liberty University.

I have been involved in Christian education since 1980 when I was assigned to serve Johnstown Christian School as a speech and language therapist working for Intermediate Unit 08, an entity within the public education system in Pennsylvania. What I discovered inside the doors of Johnstown Christian School was so compelling that 6 years later my husband and I chose to send our oldest child for kindergarten. While the opportunity and ability to have our three children attend a Christian school for all of their elementary and high school years resulted in 3 young adults fully prepared for college and grounded in a traditional and service-oriented lifestyle, that story is not the primary reason I have come to meet with you today.

Shortly after joining the family at Johnstown Christian School in 1986, the administration of the school began to recognize the need to better serve students who were struggling academically. Because I held a master's degree in special education, I was asked to join the school staff to help develop a program that would assist these students. What has resulted is a continuum of services for students with varying types of learning differences.

Currently Johnstown Christian has 220 students with 13% of those on 504 plans to ensure that children with disabilities have equal access to education as required by the American with Disabilities Act. Our student body has embraced children with learning disabilities, autism, Down Syndrome, ADHD, physical limitations and emotional disorders. Services are provided following a Response to Intervention type model with both in-class and pullout possibilities. Students who are identified as needing more intense or small group instruction receive reading and math intervention from either our Act 89 teacher provided by the Intermediate Unit or our school funded resource room. Elementary students needing tutorial help can receive this assistance with a Title 1 teacher. However, the intervention that has been most impactful is provided by our Discovery program.

The Discovery program is a model of intense academic and perceptual intervention for which training is provided by the National Institute for Learning Development (NILD) based in Norfolk, VA. At Johnstown Christian we have seen children's lives and abilities to learn forever changed for the better as a result of this intervention. For 5 years, I served as the Research and Curriculum Director of this international organization where I helped to develop intervention methods and materials now widely used in

hundreds of Christian schools across the country. Because of that position, I have visited many private schools where I have seen quality intervention offered in professional and nurturing environments. More specifically for this discussion, I have visited nearly 30 Christian schools across Pennsylvania providing in-service training and consultative services. In doing that, I have had the privilege to meet many teachers committed to serving students with special needs within Christian schools. With one of the concerns about offering school choice through a voucher system being that private schools do not welcome students who learn differently, I am here to tell you that many schools are well prepared to accept and educate students of not only varying backgrounds, but also of varying learning abilities. I have visited schools that not only employ the NILD program, but also use the same best practice methods of intervention found within public education including Wilson Reading, Reading Recovery, Orton-Gillingham and the Barton system.

Another concern of many who would oppose school choice is that private schools do not have the same accountability as public schools. This may be a technically accurate statement, but it is misleading. While we do not subscribe to the SAME accountability system, we do have systems of accountability. Our students participate in standardized testing and those scores are used to help us determine who is achieving at appropriate levels, who we might want to consider for participation in enrichment programs, and which students might be in need of intervention services. They also help us as a school determine overall if our program is meeting the academic expectations according to the educational standards developed by the state of Pennsylvania. But even more importantly, those scores inform parents and guardians if their children are achieving. Accountability for the program of a school and the success of the students more rightly belongs to the parents who send their children there and parents should have the right to choose a school where their children can find success.

Many parents across the state do exercise the right to choose the school their children will attend and are fortunate because they have the means to do so. Mary's parents exercised that right to choose a different school when at the end of 4th grade she still could not read. Today Mary holds a master's degree and helps elementary children who struggle as she did. Ed's parents exercised that right when in 9th grade he had become such a victim of bullying that he needed not only medication for his diagnosed ADHD, but also medication for depression. Today Ed has graduated from a music conservatory and performs regularly at the National Cathedral and other venues in Washington D.C. How many Marys and Eds are out there who need a different method of teaching or a fresh start with a different peer group and their parents are unable to afford that opportunity. School choice puts the decision of what school is right for a child in the place where that decision should be, in the hands and hearts of their parents or guardians. If schools are not properly equipped or staffed to meet the needs of their children, parents of all socioeconomic levels should be able to make a different educational choice. This right should not just fall to the parents of those who are economically advantaged.

Johnstown Christian School has successfully educated students in Cambria and Somerset counties for 66 years. We are accredited by the Association of Christian Schools International as well as the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools. Our teachers all hold bachelors or master's degrees and are certified by either the state of Pennsylvania or ACSI with both entities requiring on-going professional development. Today we are able to offer not only a complete array of intervention

services but also a complete academic program including teaching Spanish along with the traditional academics in the elementary years, 8 high school classes that are dual enrolled with our local community college, and technology, fine arts, shop, and family and consumer science classes across all grade levels and we do this for less than the per pupil cost of the local public schools. Over the last 5 years an average of 92% of our graduates has pursued higher education.

Approximate 25% of student the body at Johnstown Christian would qualify for free and reduced lunches if they attended a different school. We are able to welcome their families to JCS because we can offer tuition assistance as a result of the dollars provided on our behalf to the ACSI scholarship organization, the Children's Tuition Fund, through the EITC Program. We have greatly appreciated the opportunity to serve these lower income students and the EITC scholarship program has made that possible. However, we would like to be able to offer this opportunity to more families and fill the more than 50 empty chairs that are awaiting those students at JCS.

Education across the state of Pennsylvania has come to a difficult crossroads. In many cases, costs continue to rise while achievement continues to falter. Senate Bill 1 indicates that the Opportunity Scholarships and increased EITC funding *"will foster development of a more capable and better-education work force and will better enable the Commonwealth to fulfill its obligation of providing children with the opportunity to receive quality education."* In a free enterprise system we must agree with this. Regardless of income, parents are able to freely choose their family doctors, the stores in which they shop, the athletic and fine arts programs they wish to pursue, and the churches in which they would like to worship. But they are not free to choose the type of education or the school in which they believe their children will receive the best education unless their income makes that possible. It is time to allow free enterprise to bring potential improvement to education across the state and place the right of school choice where it belongs, in the hand of all parents, regardless of socioeconomic level because it is parents who best understand their children and their educational needs. Private schools are ready to open their doors to families who have heretofore been unable to choose an alternative to public education.

Thank you for your consideration.